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SUBJECT: RIYADH RECORD: SEPTEMBER 16-30

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Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission David Rundell
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The case against the controversial novel "Girls of Riyadh" has been dismissed. The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice met for three-days, rejecting alleged calls from the West to dismantle the organization. The Ministries of Interior and Foreign Affairs will soon introduce fingerprint and retina scans in an effort to increase border security. The Shoura Council met again to approve draft agreements on Gulf Cooperation Council pesticide regulations and crime prevention cooperation with India. END SUMMARY.

Girls of Riyadh Court Case Dropped

¶2. (S) The Court of Grievances dismissed on September 27 the case regarding the controversial novel "Girls of Riyadh" following requests by the Ministry of Culture and Information and public debate in the media (reftel). During the 10-day book fair that displayed the works of nearly fifty publishing houses in Jeddah earlier this month, there were reportedly sales of "Girls of Riyadh" despite the pending court case and the controversy the book sparked during the Riyadh book fair earlier this year. The Ministry of Culture and Information approves all books for book fairs held in the Kingdom and has repeatedly defended the publication of this novel.

Religious Police Meet, Maintain Power

¶3. (C) In preparation for the three-day meeting of senior officials of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (religious police), Commission President Sheikh Ibrahim al-Ghaith met with Riyadh Governor Prince Salman on September 18 to denounce recent reports alleging western calls to dismantle the religious police. During the meeting, Interior Minister Prince Naif reportedly defended the religious police, saying that it is "an honor for Saudi Arabia to have such a religious commission working for the good of the people." He also commented on terrorism, stating that "terrorists claim that we (the SAG) support the West, but the reality is that our strategy stems from Islam and they (the terrorists) are the enemies of Allah." Following this meeting, SAG officials publicly stated that the religious police remain strong and there are no plans to dismantle it. (COMMENT: The inner workings of the religious police are rarely publicized. The SAG's open support of the religious police may suggest a growing uneasiness on the part of the SAG about negative public perception of the West's "involvement" in Saudi politics. Public expression of anti-western sentiment increased following the Pope's recent remarks on Islam, as well as the sentencing of Saudi national

Homaidan al-Turki in the U.S. for the sexual assault of his Indonesian housemaid. END COMMENT.)

14. (U) The Ministry of Islamic Affairs announced on September 24 that it will offer refresher courses to 2160 imams across the Kingdom. Media reports indicated that the Ministry of Islamic Affairs has also terminated 2000 imams. This move comes in the wake of calls for increased transparency and coordination among the imams.

Retina Scans and Fingerprint Databases: SAG Moves Ahead

15. (C) According to media reports, the Ministry of Interior intends to begin archiving fingerprints of Saudi citizens this year. The move will serve as a means to secure borders, better investigate criminal activities, and prevent over-stayers. A Saudi interlocutor from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Passport Division told PolOff that it is also moving forward with plans to put fingerprints on passports and use fingerprint and retina scans at the ports of entry. He said that, although this plan has been in place for some time, the SAG was waiting on its development and usage in the United States first in order to leverage those best practices. He also said that the main purpose was to protect Saudi borders and prevent over-stayers in the Kingdom.

Shoura Council Meets, Approves Agreements

16. (C) The Shoura Council approved a cooperation agreement between Saudi Arabia and India relating to sports and youth during its September 10 meeting. The Council subsequently approved a draft Memorandum of Understanding on crime prevention between the two countries during its September 25 session. The Council also approved a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) regulation on the use of pesticides. (COMMENT: The controversial debate that began on September 10 regarding draft laws on cybercrime and blue tooth technology was not continued. However, the ongoing efforts of the Shoura Council appear to indicate that it is playing an increasingly important role in advising the SAG. END COMMENT.)

VIP Visits

17. (U) Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal participated in meetings with the Foreign Ministers of the GCC, Association of the South East Asian Countries, and the European Tripartite Committee at the 61st session of the U.N. General Assembly on September 21. Crown Prince Sultan talked about GCC and other regional issues with President of the United Arab Emirates Sheikh Khalifah bin Zayid al-Nahayan on September 21. King Abdullah discussed bilateral relations with Jordan's King Abdullah via telephone on September 27, as well as with Kuwaiti Amir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah on September 30. Saudi Ambassador to the United Kingdom joined several other Arab state ambassadors in a meeting with Prime Minister Tony Blair on September 29 to discuss the relationship between the U.K. and the Arab World. Secretary General of the Higher Tourism Commission Prince Sultan bin Salman bin Abdulaziz received a letter on September 30 from the Spanish King Juan Carlos regarding future cooperation on tourism.
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